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Title: Nature, Woman and the Marginalized: Postcolonial Ecofeminism in the Select Works of Indian English Women Novelists

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Synopsis

In the constellation of Indian English women novelists the noteworthy names include Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Gita Mehta and Kiran Desai. Reading through their novels like Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*,Desai's *Fire on the Mountain,* Roy's *A God of Small Things*and Mehta's *A River Sutra* it becomes clear that they seem to deal with the issues like the position of the woman and the marginalised in the Indian society, the relationship of men and women among themselves and with nature and the continuation of the colonial oppression over the women. Though viewed from a varied range of perspectives very little has been discussed about the postcolonial ecofeministic element and treatment in the novels of the Indian English women novelists. I propose to look into these novels from the ecofeminist perspective by exploring the possibility of a relation between ecology and the women protagonist of these novels.

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary movement that calls for a new way of thinking about nature, politics, and spirituality. Ecofeminist theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. Ecofeminists argue that traditional male-centred approaches involving exploitation of and supremacy over women are echoed in patriarchal practices and discourse with respect to the environment. Ecofeminism came into being in the early 1970s in the United States, when a number of women became disillusioned with the mainstream environmental movement and sought to create more awareness among feminists about environmental concerns. Ecofeminism is a new movement born out of the high interest given, in the last few decades, to both feminism and ecological/environmental movements. . Phrased like this, ecofeminism is ecological because the preservation of ecosystems is a prime objective, and feminist on the basis that it offers up ways to recognize and counter male favouritism. Feminists are interested in why women are treated as inferior to men, and why they have only been partially included in the sphere of culture. Environmentalists are interested in why nature is treated as inferior to culture and why humanity has not commonly been included within the definitions of nature. Both movements seek liberation. So ecofeminists by connecting them together are aiming to construct new practices based on a model of non-domination. In other words ecofeminism is the social movement that regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected. It is one of the few movements analysing the theories that actually connects two movements. More recently, ecofeminism theories have extended their analysis to consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature and also racism and social

inequalities. Consequently it is now better understood as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature.

Indian physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva's work comes closest to ecofeminism in the Indian context. Shiva asserts that while gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development. She argues for the recovery of the feminine principle—Prakriti—to counter the destructive effects of the Western model of development, which she calls maldevelopment.

Although not many, there are a few novels in the history of Indian English literature which can be read through the lens of ecofeminism. With the exception of Arundhati Roy, no other Indian English women novelist has been mentioned in the field of postcolonial Ecocriticism or ecofeminism. Even critics taking up an ecocritical reading of Roy's novel have often left out the gendered aspects altogether. I propose to position and acknowledge the thoughts of the Indian English women novelists in the context of the theories of global ecofeminism with a specifically Indian cultural context. My attempt is to explore some of the main features of postcolonial ecofeminism and locate the idea of ecofeminism within the Indo-Anglian (Indian English) literary context particularly in the works of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Gita Mehta and Kiran Desai. I intend to outline the lineage of postcolonial ecofeminism in India in terms of fiction that explicitly foreground women. It is an endeavour to bring to light the ecofeminist concerns of the Indian English women novelists which have remained neglected till date.

Ecofeminism gave a new perspective to the suffering of Indian woman. Violence against nature and against women is inter-related. Especially in India the identification of feminine principle with nature has its own relevance. Kamala Markandaya is a major post-independence Indian English women novelist whose protagonists are all mostly women. While portraying the characters in detail she mirrors the awakened feminine sensibility. In her novels, however,can be found the first traces of ecocritical and ecofeminist thoughts in a purely Indian context**.** *Nectar in a Sieve, A Handful of Rice* and *Coffer Dams* depict the undeniable linkbetween woman and nature, the simultaneous oppression of women and nature in different forms and other social inequalities. Although the novel predates the emergence of ecofeminism as an institutionalized, theoretical field, several critics who have written about *Nectar in a Sieve*view Rukmani's connection with the land and nature through the prism of ecofeminism. *A Handful of Rice* seems to be a sequel to *Nectar in a Sieve*. If *Nectar in a Sieve* deals with rural economics**,** *A Handful of Rice*deals with urban economics. However both deal with poverty, hunger and exploitation in the ruthless society. In her novel, *Coffer Dams*(1969), Kamala Markandaya introduces the theme of racial tension by bringing a group of British and Indian technocrats together to build a dam in a hilly tribal region in the south of India. labourers, are in direct conflict. Kamala Markandaya expresses her ecofeministic view that all human beings are equal and mechanical progress is meaningless if it is achieved by suppressing human values. The suffering inflicted on the tribal people who live in the lap of nature is a torture on nature itself.

The other prominent writer of this age in whose work we see the dominance of nature images which act as important part of theme is Anita Desai. Nature which includes animals, plants and birds, has a strong presence in almost all her works. Known in Indian-English fiction

for ushering in the psychological novel, Desai uses external landscapes to portray interior states of mind. Ecofeminism looks at attitudes and world views that differ basing on male and female perspectives of life. Desai brings out in her novels the connections between how men and women interact and the way they interact with the environment. Anita Desai through her narrative technique addresses the close link between environment and female psychology. Through an examination of her writing from an ecofeminist viewpoint, the relationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature becomes apparent. In *Cry, the Peacock, Fire on the Mountain and Voices in the City,* the language and imagery employed suggest her treatment of nature.

In Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra***,** ecofeminism takes on a new dimension. It is still about the women's equation with nature, and her act of reaching out to nature in her crisis and despair. But nature is not scared or endangered here. Coming close to nature, the women also imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged, 'immortal' nature. Mehta presents the river Narmada as a young, beautiful and attractive women, as an organic being full of human emotions. These ideas that characterize the river are later embodied in Uma, the chief protagonist of the Minstrel's Story. Uma and Shankar become the earthy embodiments of the Narmada and the God Shiva, and nature and women merge in perfect gyno, ecological harmony. This is a new dimension of ecofeminism. In *A River Sutra* Mehta probes the nature- women relationship from a special perspective. The last three stories among the six of the novel under score the above theme in different ways.

Ecofeminism's primary concern is the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature that are manipulated into hierarchical binaries with culturally justified domination. This oppressive coupling of women and nature is present in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things,* which portrays the deterioration of the fictional village of Ayemenem as an allegory for the corruption of the Ipe family.The ecofeminist approach to the novel is also manifested through the discrimination meted out to Ammu and Velutha on the basis of caste, race and gender. The environment and its degradation is brought into focus and placed in conjunction with the oppression and exploitation of mankind including women.

I have tried to bring to light the thoughts of Indian English women novelist like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Gita Mehta in the context of global ecofeminism within a post-colonial Indian framework Through my research I shall endeavour to explore the ecocritical and ecofeminist view point of the Indian English women novelists because very little has been said about them and very little research material is available on them.

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